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## Doubtful Certainties: The Politics of Reading in Seneca's *Oedipus*

Qui legis Oedipoden caligantemque Thyesten,  
Colchidas et Scyllas, quid nisi monstra legis?

- Martial, 10.4.1-2

non tam interest quo animo scribatur quam quo accipiat

- Cicero, *Ad Fam* 6.7.1

*Summary:* This paper examines Seneca's *Oedipus* as a reader both of poetry and of himself. I argue that when Seneca describes prophecy (233-38; 626-58) and extispicy (293-399), he presents these acts as poetic texts that demand interpretation and that Oedipus repeatedly fails to comprehend. The tragedy overall emphasizes the gap between the protagonist's assumed knowledge and the audience's. As a result, it belittles Oedipus' authoritarian attitude and creates a sustained joke at his expense. Seneca undermines Oedipus by depicting him, simultaneously, as a paranoid ruler bent on enforcing his own version of events, and as the unwitting object of others' analysis. Over the course of the play, Oedipus is reduced to a set of signs that Seneca invites the audience to decode. The playwright also uses the binary *dubius* / *certus* to illustrate Oedipus' increasing lack of political and analytical control.

*Keywords:* Seneca; Oedipus; authority; signs; ambiguity; reader; interpretation

There are four episodes in Seneca's *Oedipus* that find no equivalent in Sophocles: Oedipus reminisces about his encounter with the Sphinx (92-102); Creon reports the Delphic oracle in full (233-38); Tiresias conducts an extispicy (293-399); and Laius' ghost rises from the dead to condemn his criminal offspring (530-658).<sup>1</sup> These differences are so marked that they cannot simply be ascribed to Seneca's style or to contemporary Roman tastes.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they are integral to the way in which Seneca's tragedy approaches issues of knowledge. Whereas Sophocles' Oedipus interrogates

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<sup>1</sup> It is not clear whether these episodes are entirely Seneca's invention or whether they have been adapted from earlier literary version of the myth, tragic or otherwise. On the sources likely to have been available to Seneca when he composed his play, see Töchterle (1994) 9-18.

<sup>2</sup> Previous generations of scholars typically blamed these scenes on what they regarded as Seneca's degenerate tastes and/or dramatic incompetence. The play's extispicy, in particular, has attracted a lot of hostile verdicts over the last century, of which I provide just a few. Friedrich (1933) 62-98 argued that it was composed as a sensationalist and entirely detachable episode; Mendell (1941) 13 accords it little significance: "the scene is long and harrowing and well nigh exhausts even Seneca's vocabulary, but produces no results as far as the solution of the plot is concerned." Although Pratt (1939) 93-5 and (1989) 98-9 has far more patience for the extispicy's symbolism, he too regards it as a symptom of Senecan 'melodrama'. Recent, favorable appraisal of Seneca's dramatic aims in the *Oedipus* is given by Boyle (2011) and Kohn (2013) 32-49.

individuals in his search for Laius' killer, Seneca's Oedipus confronts evidence much more directly, in the form of prophetic utterances and rituals that demand analysis from protagonist and audience alike.<sup>3</sup> Prophecy, extispicy, and memory take on meta-poetic qualities in this play, functioning as quasi-literary texts that Oedipus must scour for meaning.<sup>4</sup> His failure to do so is a source of prolonged dramatic irony, because Seneca's play encourages the audience to see what Oedipus cannot.<sup>5</sup> Occupying the core of this tragedy is a contest over interpretation, over how one reads omens, prophecy, poetry, and finally, Oedipus himself. It is a contest that subordinates the protagonist to the audience's sense of superior knowledge.

This act of subordination is what makes knowledge such a deeply political issue in Seneca's tragedy. Like Sophocles' Oedipus, Seneca's takes pride in his ability to solve riddles, or in his own terminology, to transform *dubia* into *certa*. He cannot, however, exercise control over poetic meaning, because he himself is fundamentally *dubius*, an object of audience analysis, and of hostile critique from the play's various *uates*. The language of Seneca's tragedy draws close connections between Oedipus' autocratic power and his desire either to regulate poetic utterance, or to enforce his own interpretation as absolute and final. The fact that he achieves neither of these possibilities demonstrates his weakness at the same time as it creates an atmosphere of 'doublespeak' or veiled criticism, in which the ruler cannot detect the hostile content that is patently obvious to other readers.<sup>6</sup> The *uates* of Seneca's play attack Oedipus, but he cannot understand their message. In the end, he himself becomes a *monstrum* for the play's audience to interpret: his body is a text; he is presented as a sacrificial victim; he is a riddle "more perplexing than his own Sphinx"

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<sup>3</sup> On rhetoric and interrogation in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, see Ahl (1991) 67-102 and (2008) 42-51. It seems reasonable to suppose, with Holford-Strevens (1999) 239-45, that Seneca was acquainted with the Sophoclean version, though Seneca's play is, of course, very much an independent work.

<sup>4</sup> Several scholars have acknowledged, in passing, the meta-literary qualities of one or more of these scenes: Schiesaro (2003) 8-12 regards the Tiresias-Laius episode as fundamentally meta-poetic; Trinacty (2014) 214-31 examines Oedipus' role in 'reading' the literary intertext of the necromancy scene; Seo (2013) 100 attributes a meta-poetic function to Oedipus' memory of the Sphinx.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term 'audience' throughout this paper regardless of the debate over whether Seneca's tragedies were or were not intended for performance, and the adjacent debate over whether they are in fact performable. Those in favor of treating the plays as fully stageable dramatic scripts include: Sutton (1986) and Kohn (2013); those who define Seneca as 'recitation drama' include: Zwiwerlein (1966); Fantham (1992) 34-49; and Goldberg (2000). For a new approach to the question of dramatic recitation, see Bexley (forthcoming). Rather than address such issues here, I regard the term 'audience' as encompassing anyone who watches, listens to, or even reads this play.

<sup>6</sup> On doublespeak and veiled criticism, see MacMullen (1966); Ahl (1984a) and (1984b); Bartsch (1994); and Rudich (1997).

(*magis...Sphinge perplexum sua*, 641). In Seneca's version of the Oedipus story, deciphering poetic meaning is equivalent to challenging the ruler's sense of himself; it is an essentially political act.

### *Oedipus Reading*

Each of the four episodes under discussion in this paper – the Sphinx (92-102); the Pythia's oracle (233-38); the extispicy (293-399); Laius' prophecy (626-58) – is described by Seneca in language that evokes the composition and performance of poetry. In other words, these episodes may be regarded as poetic texts not only for the reason that they invite analysis, but also because they reflect on the very act of creating a text. The Sphinx is a perfect example. When Oedipus recalls his encounter with her, he depicts her as a weaver who “twines words in blind rhythms” (*caecis uerba nectentem modis*, 92) and speaks “knotted words and entwined trickery” (*nodosa...uerba et implexos dolos*, 101). He also calls her a *uates* (93), which in the context of the surrounding imagery hints at the word's etymology *a uersibus uiendis* (“from the weaving of songs” Varro *L.* 7.36).<sup>7</sup> Such terminology doubtless alludes to Sophocles' description of the Sphinx as ἡ ῥαψῳδός (*OT* 391), but Seneca's purpose also goes beyond mere recognition of his dramatic predecessor.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Sophocles, who has Creon mention the Sphinx in passing, Seneca has Oedipus recollect her in substantial detail. As a consequence, he brings to the fore Oedipus' encounter with a poet and with her poetry.<sup>9</sup> Not only is weaving an established metaphor for the creation of a poetic text, it also implies a deceptive and potentially hostile act: the weavers of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular, often use their art to trick others and to challenge higher powers.<sup>10</sup> Artistic practice is just as political in Seneca's *Oedipus*,

<sup>7</sup> For the various Latin etymologies of *uates*, see Newman (1967) 15.

<sup>8</sup> It is likely that the Greek term ῥαψῳδός also takes its etymology from weaving, combining ῥάπτω and αἰοδή, as in Pindar *Nem* 2.2 ῥαπτῶν ἐπέων...αἰοδοί. On the links between Seneca's *uates* and Sophocles' ῥαψῳδός, see Töchterle (1994) *ad Oed.* 93, who provides an extensive list of comparanda, and Boyle (2011) *ad Oed.* 93.

<sup>9</sup> Seo (2013) 100 regards the episode as having yet another meta-literary layer, namely Oedipus' recollection of his former self, which she argues recalls the strong, decisive Oedipus that appears at the beginning of Sophocles' tragedy.

<sup>10</sup> Snyder (1981) investigates the origins of weaving imagery and its association with poetic composition in early Greek epic and lyric. As regards Ovidian scholarship, weaving is as popular a theme as it is in the *Metamorphoses* itself. Harries (1990) treats the Arachne episode; Rosati (1999) analyzes the entwined topics of weaving and poetry in *Met.* 4 and 6; Johnson (2008) 74-95 discusses the ways in which weaving – and poetic activity more generally – inspire divine anger in Ovid's epic.

where poetic texts often critique Oedipus in aggressive terms, and where the protagonist's ability to overcome figures like the Sphinx is closely related to his capacity for secure, stable kingship. Oedipus' acquisition of political power depends upon his having interpreted the Sphinx's poetry correctly, and although this event is a standard element of the Oedipus myth, Seneca, as we shall see, uses it to draw close links between politics and reading. In this regard, Oedipus' recollection of the Sphinx functions programmatically, anticipating his encounter with other *uates* in the play and presenting the only example of his analyzing a poetic text and comprehending its hostility with any degree of success. His position as a reader, moreover, is highlighted by the phrase *carmen...solui* ("I untied the song", 102), because the verb *soluere* can be used to denote literary analysis (e.g. Quint. *I.O.* 1.9.2: *uersus...soluere*, "to analyze poetry"). The fact that Oedipus does not quote the riddle at all in his reminiscence suggests that its meaning is no longer an issue; it has been resolved and hence, the play's audience will not get a chance to examine it.

The Pythia's oracle, in contrast, is quoted in full. It is even marked off as a quotation, because when Creon delivers it at 233-38, he switches out of trochaic tetrameter and into the dactylic hexameter typically used for oracles.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Sophocles' Oedipus must examine Delphi's information second-hand in the form of Creon's summary (*OT* 84-105), Seneca's protagonist and those watching him are given a complete text on which to pass judgment. The text, moreover, is presented as inherently poetic, since the Pythia, like the Sphinx, is a *uates* (230), and her "tangled response" (*sorte perplexa*, 212) and "twisted obscurities" (*ambage flexa*, 214) recall the Sphinx's *implexos dolos*. (101). Oedipus, naturally, boasts of his ability to comprehend such material; he commands Creon: *fare, sit dubium licet / ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur* ("speak it, even though it is uncertain / understanding ambiguities is a skill granted to Oedipus alone" 215-16). Alluding to his previous triumph over the enigmatic Sphinx, Oedipus implies that superior knowledge is now integral to his self-definition. His choice of words likewise conveys this idea, because the conjunction of *noscere* and *Oedipus* points to a pun on οἶδα present in the hero's name and used already by Sophocles (*OT* 397).<sup>12</sup> Of course, Oedipus' claims to

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<sup>11</sup> Ahl (1991) 58 draws attention to the significance of this metrical change.

<sup>12</sup> The *noscere* / *Oedipus* wordplay is noted by Frank (1995) 129 and Fitch and McElduff (2002) 26. For Sophocles' punning on Oedipus' name, see Goldhill (1986) 216-19; for puns in the myth overall, see Segal (1993) 56.

knowledge produce ironic effects in both the Greek and Roman versions of the tragedy, but Seneca makes this irony much starker, by presenting the Pythia's entire text, which cannot seem at all *dubius* to the audience:

Mitia Cadmeis remeabunt sidera Thebis,  
 si profugus Dirce Ismenida liquerit hospes  
 regis caede nocens, Phoebo iam notus et infans.  
 nec tibi longa manent sceleratae gaudia caedis:  
 tecum bella geres, natis quoque bella relinques,  
 turpis maternos iterum reuolutus in ortos.

Gentle to Cadmean Thebes will the stars return in their motion  
 If the fugitive guest leave the spring of Ismenian Dirce.  
 He killed the king and brought plague, marked out an as infant by Phoebus.  
 Villainous killer, you will not enjoy your pillage much longer!  
 You'll fight a war with yourself, leave war to your sons as their portion,  
 Son, who vilely returned to rise back in the womb of the mother.<sup>13</sup>

(*Oedipus* 233-38)

Contrary to Oedipus' expectations, there seems to be nothing to solve here. The oracle's latter lines even employ second-person forms to point to Oedipus directly as the guilty party.<sup>14</sup> When, following this quotation, Oedipus proceeds to question Creon about Laius' murder, his inability to interpret the Pythia's poetry could not be clearer. At the same time, the audience has been given a chance to exercise its own interpretive powers, and to comprehend what Oedipus cannot.

Seneca pursues these themes of poetry and reading later in the second act, where Tiresias and Manto conduct a sacrifice in the hope of conjuring the name of Laius' murderer from the entrails.<sup>15</sup> As many scholars have observed, the physical signs produced by this lengthy ritual appear to symbolize episodes from Oedipus' life, and from the Theban mythic cycle more generally.<sup>16</sup> Hence: the sacrificed heifer is

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<sup>13</sup> All block translations in this essay come from Ahl (2008) which is a masterful translation of both Seneca's and Sophocles' plays.

<sup>14</sup> Both Boyle (2011) *ad Oed.* 236-8 and Töchterle (1994) *ad Oed.* 236 remark the Pythia's second-person address without, however, considering how it effects the characterization of Oedipus.

<sup>15</sup> Where and how to divide the acts in Seneca's *Oedipus* is a tricky question, one over which scholars themselves are divided. See Boyle (2011) 98-9 for a summary of the arguments. Overall, I concur with Paratore (1956) 99, Müller (1953) 449 n.1, and Boyle (2011) 98-9 in giving the play a six-act structure, which divides as follows: Act 1 (1-109); Act 2 (202-402); Act 3 (509-708); Act 4 (764-881); Act 5 (915-79); Act 6 (998-1061).

<sup>16</sup> Major studies of the episode's symbolism include: Pratt (1939) 93-9; Bettini (1983) and (1984); and Busch (2007). Töchterle (1994) *ad loc.* and Boyle (2011) *ad loc.* both provide ample commentary in their discussion of this section.

pregnant in an unnatural way, signifying Jocasta (371-5); smoke from the altar settles in a ring around the king's head, designating his kingship and self-blinding (325-6); the sacrificial flame splits in two and fights itself, designating Eteocles and Polynices (321-3); further signs of the impending Theban civil war are found in the liver, which has seven veins – the seven gates of Thebes (364) – and two nodes, indicating shared power (359-60).<sup>17</sup> Given their wealth of allusions, these entrails are comprehensible only to someone who possesses prior literary knowledge of the Theban cycle. Like so much of Senecan drama, the extispicy scene plays on its own 'secondariness', encouraging the audience to situate it within the context of earlier poetry.<sup>18</sup> It is those watching the play, and not those inside it, who can understand fully the literary texture of this ritual.

Further, the ritual itself resembles poetic material and its interpretation is described as if it were a form of reading. Tiresias is called upon to analyze the *signa* (384) and *notae* (331; 352) present in or on the victims' bodies; the latter term, in particular, conflates ritual interpretation with reading, since *nota* denotes not only symbols, but also lettering and written communication. Similarly, the verb *eruo*, which Tiresias employs at 297 – *fata eruantur* ("let fate's decree be rooted out") – can also be used in the context of uncovering hidden meanings in literature or oratory, as in Quintilian's description of rhetorical emphasis: *cum ex aliquo dicto latens aliquid eruitur* ("when something hidden is extracted from some phrase", *I.O.* 9.2.64). This connection between interpreting natural signs and interpreting a literary text is not unique to Seneca, either, because Cicero regards the two practices as analogous in his *De Divinatione*: *interpretes, ut grammatici poetarum, proxime ad eorum, quos interpretantur, diuinationem uidentur accedere* ("men capable of interpreting seem to

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<sup>17</sup> On the symbolism of the flame and smoke, see Pratt (1939) 93-5 and Paratore (1956) 119. In his discussion of the liver, Pratt (1939) 98 makes a further, ingenious observation: the two nodes rising from the divinatory organ "with equal swelling" (*capita paribus bina consurgunt toris*, 360) can also be taken to represent the two occupants of Jocasta's marriage bed (*torus*). Bettini (1984) 145-52 provides the most comprehensive and convincing analysis of the pregnant heifer, proposing not only that its perversion evokes Jocasta and Oedipus, but also that Seneca's contradictory phrase *conceptus innuptae bouis* (373) recalls Sophocles' *Oedipus* 1214, where the chorus states that time has long ago condemned the king's "unmarried marriage": δικάζει τ'ἄγαμον γάμον πάλαι. Busch (2007) advances a contrary argument by suggesting that the extispicy's signs do not permit such clear analysis; while clever, his suggestions are undermined somewhat by the fact that Statius (*Theb.* 12.429-32) regarded the details of Seneca's extispicy as very clear indeed.

<sup>18</sup> Such 'secondariness' more usually results in self-conscious metatheatre, as in the famous cases of Seneca's *Medea* citing her own name. On the literary self-awareness of Senecan drama, see in particular: Boyle (1997) 85-137; Schiesaro 2003, 70-138; Littlewood (2004); Hinds (2011); and Seo (2013) 94-121.

approach very near to the prophecy of the gods they interpret, just as scholars do when they interpret the poets”, *Div.* 1.34).<sup>19</sup> The extispicy, therefore, is yet another kind of poetic material that Oedipus, and the audience, must confront in this play.

The fourth and final scene of reading comes in Act 3, when Creon reports the necromancy conducted by Tiresias, and recites in full Laius’ prophetic, condemnatory speech. Although many of this scene’s meta-poetic qualities have been noted already by Alessandro Schiesaro, I shall summarize them briefly here.<sup>20</sup> First, Seneca draws attention to Tiresias’ combined role as *mantis* and poet, calling him *uates* three times in the space of Creon’s speech (552; 571; 607). The seer’s authorial role extends further still, because when he summons the dead from Hade, he engages in an act of poetic creation, reanimating major literary characters from the Theban cycle: Zethus and Amphion (611-2); Niobe (613-5); Agave and Pentheus (615-8). Schiesaro remarks that Tiresias’ action “powerfully re-enacts what poetry and poets do”; it revivifies – and in Laius’ case, endows with speech – *personae* that otherwise have no agency of their own.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, the *carmen magicum* that Tiresias utters (561) functions as both an incantation and as poetry. It may even be construed more specifically as tragic poetry, since the dead whom Tiresias reanimates belong to tragedy more than to any other genre: Zethus and Amphion featured in Euripides’ lost *Antiopa*, and in Pacuvius’; Niobe in plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles; Pentheus and Agave most famously in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.

As if to match its meta-tragic content, Seneca’s necromancy scene is also meta-theatrical. While Tiresias resembles an author composing a text, Creon resembles an actor presenting that text to an audience. As was the case with the Pythia’s oracle, Creon relays Laius’ words in direct speech (626-58), an action that leads him to step into the part of Laius and assume his dramatic *persona* for more than thirty lines. Although most striking, understandably, when staged, this layering of performance within performance nonetheless emerges clearly even when the scene is read. Creon is an actor, and once again, Oedipus is the audience. Creon could even be said to play the further part of a tragic messenger, inasmuch as he reports at length the details of an off-stage event, to someone waiting for news, at a critical point in the tragedy’s

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<sup>19</sup> The connection is explored in more detail by Struck (2004) 165-92 who argues that the semiotics of divination resemble closely ancient allegorical readings of poetry, and that the two approaches were particularly popular among adherents of Stoic philosophy.

<sup>20</sup> Schiesaro (2003) 8-12.

<sup>21</sup> Schiesaro (2003) 9.



action.<sup>22</sup> Dramatic self-awareness permeates this entire scene and, as in the previous three instances, it puts Oedipus in the position of watching, listening to, and ultimately having to interpret what has been performed.

Seneca also emphasizes the poetic texture of the necromancy scene by drawing close connections between Tiresias qua *uates* and Laius' ghost, and further connecting the two of them to Vergil's Sibyl. Laius in particular resembles Tiresias so closely that he becomes almost an extension of the seer himself.<sup>23</sup> Both are disheveled – Tiresias wears “dirty attire” (*squalente cultu*, 554), Laius's hair is “caked with dirt and grime” (*paedore foedo squalidam obtentus comam*, 625) – and both speak *ore rabido* (“with raging mouth”, 561-2; 626). The latter phrase is significant because it recalls Vergil's Sibyl (*os rabidum*, *Aen.* 6.80; *rabida ora*, *Aen.* 6.102), herself a simultaneously poetic and prophetic figure, whose role as *vates* makes her, in the words of Emily Gowers, “a plausible surrogate for Vergil.”<sup>24</sup> This potential confluence of author and character occurs at an internal level in Seneca's *Oedipus*, with Laius replicating Tiresias' authorial role as *uates*. Just as Creon's speech overall may be regarded as a kind of poetic text with Creon as its performer, so Laius' speech resembles a poetic text with Laius/Tiresias as its author. Examined from one angle, Laius is a dramatic character; from another, he is a poet figure like the Pythia and the Sphinx.

Taken altogether, the four poetic ‘texts’ in this play achieve the same end: they foreground the act of reading. Seneca compels both Oedipus and the audience to test their respective powers of interpretation. At the same time, audience members are able to analyze this material from a more informed standpoint than Oedipus qua character could even hope to achieve. Thus, Seneca creates a gap between internal and external ‘readers’, and this gap widens progressively over the course of the drama.

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<sup>22</sup> Boyle (2011) *ad Oed.* 530-658 likens Creon's retelling of Laius' speech to a messenger speech. The hesitancy Creon displays prior to delivering his report is likewise typical of Seneca's messengers: see, for instance, *Phaedra* 991-5.

<sup>23</sup> On Laius as an extension of Tiresias, see Schiesaro (2003) 11. Statius, always a close reader of Seneca, acknowledges this connection between Laius and Tiresias at *Thebaid* 2.94-124, where the former appears to Eteocles in a dream, disguised as the seer.

<sup>24</sup> Gowers (2005) 171.

### *Oedipus Ruling*

As much as Seneca's Oedipus prides himself on his ability to answer riddles and decode oracles, he also regards that ability as fundamental to his status as ruler. In this tragedy, acts of interpretation are in themselves acts of power: Oedipus strives to resolve not only ambiguous poetic meaning, but ambiguous political motives as well; he makes parallel efforts to exert his grip on kingship and his grasp of the play's multiple poetic texts. Seneca associates these two spheres of Oedipus' activity via the binary terms *dubius* and *certus*, which dominate the play's language whenever the protagonist attempts to impose or confirm his authority.

In his influential study of Seneca's *Oedipus*, Donald Mastronade shows how the tragedy's themes develop around repeated images and clusters of adjectives that draw various sections of the text together into a tight, symbolic system.<sup>25</sup> The adjectives *dubius* and *certus* belong to this pattern; Mastronade notes that the former is particularly prominent, and that it contributes to the play's overall atmosphere of foreboding.<sup>26</sup> Yet *dubius* evokes more than just Oedipus' fear and uncertainty; it also describes the kinds of ambiguity that Oedipus persistently, if misguidedly, opposes throughout the drama. When Creon returns from Delphi, for instance, he announces that the oracle has given *responsa dubia* ("unclear answers", 212). Oedipus' own immediate response is to imbue the adjective with political connotations and use it to imply that the Pythia, and/or Creon, is not assisting the state by being opaque: *dubiam salutem qui dat adflictis negat* ("uncertain help is no help at all", 213). In his role as king, Oedipus wants to feel secure, which means he wants definite solutions to the problems besetting him. Despite Creon's reminder that Delphic oracles are usually indirect – *ambage flexa Delphico mos est deo / arcana tegere* ("it is customary for the Delphic god to hide secrets in twisting riddles" 214-5), Oedipus insists that he alone has the ability to resolve dubious poetic material: *fare, sit dubium licet / ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur* ("speak, even if it is uncertain: understanding ambiguities is a skill granted to Oedipus alone" 215-6). Aside from acknowledging Sophocles' *OT* 397, where Oedipus likewise boasts of his victory over the Sphinx – ὁ μὴδὲν εἰδὼς Οἰδίπου, ἔπαυσά νιν ("I, know-nothing Oedipus, I stopped her") – line 216 of Seneca's version also characterizes Oedipus as a selfish autocrat, a role he shares with

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<sup>25</sup> Mastronade (1970).

<sup>26</sup> Mastronade (1970) 293-4.

many other Senecan protagonists.<sup>27</sup> By claiming sole interpretive power, Oedipus implies that he controls poetry itself, what it means and how it is received. In fact, Oedipus presents his singular authority (*soli...Oedipodae*) as the only solution to the oracle's inherent doubleness (*dubia*, 212; *dubiam*, 213; *ambage flexa*, 214; *dubium*, 215; *ambigua*, 216). Seneca uses this language of one and two to depict a fundamental conflict between autocratic rule, which must by nature be singular, and poetic meaning, which tends to resist being resolved into one, simple message. As far as Oedipus is concerned, ambiguities threaten his status as king.

A later scene between Oedipus and Creon explores this idea more fully. At the end of Act 3, Oedipus accuses his kinsman of plotting to take the throne, and although Creon protests that one should not condemn a potentially innocent man (699), Oedipus waves this caveat aside in favor of an autocratic response: *dubia pro certis solent / timere reges* ("kings often fear uncertainties as certainties", 699-700).<sup>28</sup> A typically Senecan *sententia*, Oedipus' reply reveals his urge to impose a single, definite meaning on ambiguous material: Creon's guilt has not been proven, it is merely suspected and, in this regard, it is open to interpretation. But Oedipus cannot tolerate such semantic ambivalence, because it has the potential to destabilize his power both as a ruler and as a reader. To protect his political position, Oedipus must judge Creon guilty, a need that he himself acknowledges with the phrase *omne quod dubium est cadat* ("everything doubtful must fall", 702).<sup>29</sup> Such an assertion puts Oedipus in the position not only of being able to judge what counts as *dubium*, but also of being able to enforce it. Oedipus' status as king allows him to enshrine his own version of events as official and final. In effect, Oedipus transforms *dubia* into *certa* precisely by punishing Creon, because once the king's verdict has been passed, interpreting the situation in any other manner amounts to an act of political rebellion. As Aegisthus remarks in the *Agamemnon*, "when a master hates, a person becomes guilty without trial" (*ubi dominus odit, fit nocens, non quaeritur* Ag. 280). The exchange between Oedipus and Creon exemplifies the truth of this aphorism: Creon's actions are defined entirely by Oedipus' autocracy, and anything *dubius* is *certus* if Oedipus declares it so. Gordon Braden's description of Senecan rhetoric sums up the

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<sup>27</sup> On the rhetoric and psychology of power in Senecan drama, see Braden (1970) and (1985) 28-62.

<sup>28</sup> Detailed analysis of this scene can be found in Mader (1993).

<sup>29</sup> The tyrannical quality of Oedipus' statement is acknowledged by the anonymous author of the *Octavia*, who adapts *Oed.* 702 and puts it into the mouth of Nero: *quidquid excelsum est cadat* (*Oct.* 471).

effect perfectly: “absolute power inserts itself between words and their significations and rewrites them as opposites.”<sup>30</sup> We may add, too, Stephen Greenblatt’s remark about Renaissance politics, which applies just as well to Seneca’s Oedipus: the quintessential sign of power is “the ability to impose one’s fictions upon the world: the more outrageous the fiction, the more impressive the manifestation of power.”<sup>31</sup>

Oedipus’ reaction to Creon in Act 3 corresponds in some essential respects to his treatment of the Pythia in Act 2. In both instances, Oedipus sets himself up in opposition to everything that is *dubius*: vatic inscrutability on Delphi’s part, political untrustworthiness on Creon’s. A major result is that Oedipus associates his ability to interpret with his ability to rule. Further, the binary of *dubius* and *certus* applies also to Oedipus himself, as Jocasta acknowledges in the play’s very first scene:

regium hoc ipsum reor:  
aduersa capere, quoque sit *dubius* magis  
status et cadentis imperi moles labet,  
hoc stare *certo* pressius fortem gradu

Being a king, I think, means this: coming to grips  
with what confronts you. The harder it is  
to stand, the more power’s burden slips and slides,  
the more determinedly you must take  
your stand. Be brave! Step confidently now!

(*Oedipus* 82-5)

Although Jocasta means to depict autocratic firmness in positive terms, the behavior she adumbrates is what Oedipus himself exhibits when he condemns Creon: he shows no sign of wavering, he reacts with absolute certainty, even in a situation that is far from clear. In effect, Oedipus confirms his own certitude by imposing it on whatever material he is required to interpret. At the same time, however, the terms of Jocasta’s description reveal a deep irony: the king must confront an uncertain situation (*dubius...status*) and take a stand (*stare*) with secure step (*certo...gradu*), all of which recalls the popular etymology of his name from οἰδέω and πούς, “swollen-foot”.<sup>32</sup> Underlying Jocasta’s words is the suggestion that Oedipus is actually far more *dubius*

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<sup>30</sup> Braden (1985) 31. Although Braden applies this remark to Sen. *Thy.* 212 – *quod nolunt uelint* – it fits Seneca’s Oedipus equally well.

<sup>31</sup> Greenblatt (1980) 13.

<sup>32</sup> As far as I am aware, Ahl (2008) is the first to note, via his translation, the way this passage puns on Oedipus’ name.

than he, or anyone else suspects. If, as Jocasta implies, Oedipus' governmental position depends on his displaying himself as *certus*, then Oedipus' very identity undermines his power. Despite his attempts to eradicate ambiguities, Oedipus will end up being the play's most ambiguous figure.

A possible objection to the argument I have advanced so far is that Seneca's Oedipus behaves in a fearful, hesitant manner far more often than he behaves in an autocratic one. Fear, in particular, appears to be his default mode, and Mira Seo notes how Oedipus' apprehension contributes to the play's already high levels of dramatic irony.<sup>33</sup> But even in this regard Oedipus displays a solipsistic attitude typical of Senecan protagonists. For instance, he fears and laments the destruction the plague has visited on Thebes only to wonder what special disaster awaits him alone: *iam iam aliquid in nos fata moliri parant /...cui reseruamur malo?* ("now the fates are devising something against me...for what evil am I being reserved?" 28-31). As in the scene with Creon, Oedipus' autocracy reveals itself in his exceptionalism. His suffering only makes him feel more prominent; paradoxically, it reinforces his own sense of power, since only the very powerful can be faced with such disasters.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Oedipus' fear enhances rather than diminishes his unshakeable sense of his own importance. By the end of the play, he even goes so far as to exult that his misfortune outstrips what Apollo predicted: *o Phoebæ mendax, fata superavi impia!* ("Apollo, you lied, I have surpassed my sacrilegious fate" 1046). Oedipus' dominant attitude at this moment is the same one he displays towards the Pythia and towards Creon: even at this nadir of wretchedness, his feelings of singularity and specialness induce him to promote his own version of events as the most valid. The power he asserts as a ruler gives him the capacity to define events as he pleases, even to the extent of calling Apollo a liar.

Of course, Oedipus can never really define events as he pleases, and that is why the business of interpretation involves such high stakes in this play. On the one hand, Oedipus desires to be both an autocratic ruler and an autocratic reader; on the other, his perspective is so limited that he does not realize his fundamental ignorance of the play's poetic texts. Neither Oedipus nor his interpretive powers can be *certus* as long as the audience understands what he cannot. Essentially, Seneca's drama is so

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<sup>33</sup> Seo (2013) 97-101.

<sup>34</sup> As Oedipus himself declares at lines 8-11, the more supreme one's power, the more open one is to fortune's blows. It is a standard sentiment in Senecan tragedy.

arranged that it invites the audience to exercise its critical powers in competition with Oedipus' own; further, those who watch, listen to, or read the play are encouraged to analyze Oedipus himself, to treat the king as precisely the kind of ambiguous poetic material he often desires to control.

### *Oedipus Text*

Far from being able to resolve ambiguities, Seneca's Oedipus himself comprises a collection of signs that require interpretation.<sup>35</sup> In the first section of this chapter I discussed Oedipus' apparent inability to understand the play's various poetic texts such as extispicy and prophecy. In this section, I argue that Seneca assimilates Oedipus himself to poetic and prophetic material. The result is that Oedipus, too, becomes subject to the audience's interpretive powers, which necessarily weakens his autocratic claims. Not only is Oedipus unaware of the meaning conveyed by the Pythia, by Laius, or by the extispicy, he also fails to read the text that is his own identity.

I mention above that the extispicy in Seneca's play may be read as a text of events from Oedipus' life and from the Theban mythic cycle. The reverse is also true: the figure of Oedipus, especially his physical form, is portrayed throughout the drama as material suitable for an extispicy. Notably, Seneca likens Oedipus to a sacrificial victim. Just as Tiresias seeks "definite signs" in the bulls' entrails (*certis...notis*, 331; *certas...notas*, 352), so Oedipus carries unmistakable marks on his own body (*certas...notas*, 811). When Oedipus commands the Corinthian, *nunc adice certas corporis nostri notas* ("now tell in addition the definite marks on my body," 811), he presents himself as essentially extispicial material, inviting interpretation in the same way that Tiresias demands to hear from Manto which signs are present in the entrails: *sed ede certas uiscerum nobis notas* ("but tell to us the innards' definite signs", 352). Language used in the extispicy scene also returns when Oedipus is punishing himself: he searches out his eyes (*scrutatur*, 965) just as Manto searches through the entrails (*scrutemur*, 372); when he tears at his sockets, the participle *eruentis* (961) recalls

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<sup>35</sup> The prevalence of signs in this play, and the onus repeatedly laid on interpreting them, suggests a connection with Sophocles' *Antigone*, especially *Ant.* 998-1014, where Tiresias describes a moment of divination and a failed sacrifice, both of which he struggles to interpret. A further potential connection between the *Antigone* and Seneca's *Oedipus* comes when Oedipus orders guards to take Creon away and shut him up in a cave as punishment: *seruate sontem saxeo inclusum specu* (707).

Tiresias' remarks at 297, *fata eruantur* ("let fate's decree be rooted out").<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Oedipus' act of "unrolling" his eyes' shattered orbs (*uulsos.../ euoluit orbes*, *Oed.* 966-7) likens his body to a poetic text, because the verbs *uoluere* and *euoluere* can denote either the unraveling of scrolls, or the recitation of verse. This latter meaning applies in the necromancy scene, when Tiresias "recites a magic song" (*carmen...magicum uoluit*, *Oed.* 561) in order to summon the dead. Finally, Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx likewise presents him as a sacrificial victim, since the creature's impatience to tear his innards (*uiscera expectans mea*, 100) can, in the context of so much extispicial activity, double as a potentially interpretive action. The Sphinx is a *uates* (93) intent on Oedipus' *viscera* (100). The fact that she sings "in blind rhythms" (*caecis...modis*, 92) also assimilates her to Tiresias, the blind *uates* par excellence, who, in the process of analyzing a sacrifice incidentally analyzes Oedipus as well.<sup>37</sup>

The main effect of these associations is to invite the play's audience to treat Oedipus precisely as if he were a piece of poetry or prophecy, a set of physical signs and symbols. Further, the protagonist's ignorance of his own identity is presented as proof of his inability to 'read' poetic material. Despite Oedipus' desire to be *certus*, he fails to grasp the significance of his own *certas notas*; the fact that he cannot properly comprehend these *notae* suggests his broader inability to comprehend texts.

The marks on Oedipus' body are one example of Seneca resuming the *certus* / *dubius* binary, this time to illustrate the protagonist's loss of authority.<sup>38</sup> Although Oedipus tries to eradicate ambiguity, he himself turns out to be fundamentally ambiguous material. Seneca emphasizes Oedipus' *dubius status* throughout the play. For instance, when Laius condemns his son to "hobble, unsure of the path" (*reptet incertus uiae*, 656), the image recalls and reverses Jocasta's exhortation for Oedipus

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<sup>36</sup> The latter correspondence is noted by Boyle (2011) *ad.* 961, who declares *eruere* a "thematic verb" in the context of this play. The verb *scrutari* is also significant, because it associates Oedipus' physical 'self-examination' with the moral self-examination Seneca advocates in his philosophy (e.g. *Ep.* 16.2: *excute te et uarie scrutare et obserua*); for more on such practices of therapeutic psychology in Seneca's *Oedipus*, see Dressler (2012) 509-13.

<sup>37</sup> Busch (2007) 239 suggests another, equally valid, way of interpreting the phrase *caecis modis*: he regards it as relating to the smoke from the sacrificial flame, which blinds Oedipus during the extispicy (*Oed.* 325-7).

<sup>38</sup> Curley (1986) 91-100, examines the ways in which Seneca uses the *dubius* / *certus* binary to evoke Oedipus' weakness as well as his strength.

to stand firm (82-5).<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Tiresias enquires during the sacrifice whether the flame is strong or whether it “creeps along uncertain of the way” (*serpit incertus uiae*, 312). Once again, such corresponding phrases draw a close connection between the events of the extispicy and the events of Oedipus’ own life, to the extent that interpreting sacrificial signs is the same act as interpreting the figure of Oedipus. The bull, too, symbolizes the king: it “rushes, doubtful, here and there” (*huc et huc dubius ruit*, 343) and, when sacrificed, gushes blood from its eyes in a manner that anticipates Oedipus’ own self-directed violence: *sed uersus retro / per ora multus sanguis atque oculos redit* (“a great amount of blood turns back and flows through the mouth and eyes”, 349-50).<sup>40</sup> Even the conjunction of *uersus* and *retro* in line 349 makes us think of Oedipus, whose incestuous actions figure in this play both as a form of return (*reuolutus*, 238) and as an overturning of the laws of nature (*natura uersa est*, 271) and of generation (*reuersas generis...uices*, 870). Not only does the extispicy represent Oedipus, on a more essential level, it *is* Oedipus; it is a natural perversion deriving from the protagonist’s perverted nature. Moreover, by using the *dubius / certus* binary in this scene, Seneca reinforces the idea that Oedipus is subject to interpretation rather than in control of it. Although the king of Thebes has on several occasions attempted to assert himself as an active ‘reader’, he has featured all along as a passive object of other people’s analysis. As much as he fails to understand poetry, Oedipus simply *is* poetry, in all its ambiguity and multiplicity.

Laius, too, characterizes Oedipus as poetic material when he denounces his son as *implicitum malum / magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua* (“an intertwined evil, a monster more perplexing than his own Sphinx”, 640-1). Recalling both the Sphinx’s song and the Pythia’s prophecy, the adjectives *implicitus* and *perplexus* point to Oedipus being a kind of text. The term *monstrum* serves a similar end, branding Oedipus not just a freak of nature, but also a prophetic symbol that requires analysis.<sup>41</sup> Because of the comparisons it draws, Laius’ interpretation of Oedipus directly challenges the king’s autocratic authority. In fact, Laius adopts the same position towards Oedipus that Oedipus once adopted towards the Sphinx. Whereas

<sup>39</sup> Chinnici (2008) 138, makes the interesting observation that the verb *repto* at *Oed.* 656 denotes the crawling movement of a child, hence Laius’ curse evokes Oedipus’ infancy and his wounded feet, along with his imminent exile as a blind old man.

<sup>40</sup> The parallel between Oedipus and the bull is noted by Fitch (2004) 48 n. 21.

<sup>41</sup> In the words of Jeffrey Cohen (1996) 4: “the monster exists only to be read...a glyph that seeks a hierophant.” For the ancient etymologies of *monstrum*, see Maltby (1991) 391-2; on the term’s significance in Seneca tragedy, see Staley (2010) 96-112, and Bexley (2011) 367 and 387-90.



Oedipus described the Sphinx as having “bloodied jaws” (*cruentos.../rictus*, 93-4), Laius calls Oedipus a “bloodied king” (*rex cruentus*, 634) who “wields the scepter with bloodied hand” (*cruenta sceptrum qui dextra geris*, 642).<sup>42</sup> By equating Oedipus with the monster he defeated and the riddle he solved, Laius implies that Oedipus has not, in fact, succeeded in reading any poetic text. Further, by asserting his own interpretive ability, Laius robs Oedipus of the power to define the world as he pleases; even more crucially, he implies that power itself has led Oedipus to misinterpret and misrepresent reality: it is because he assumes that he knows, or can dictate, what the truth is, that Oedipus has failed to see the *monstrum* he actually embodies.

Laius is not the only figure in this play who redefines and thus undermines Oedipus’ claims; the Pythia, too, uses her prophecy to reassess Oedipus’ image of himself. When she describes Laius’ murderer as a *profugus* (“fugitive” 234) and a *hospes* (“guest”, 234), she picks up on only to redeploy two key words from Oedipus’ introductory monologue: at line 23, Oedipus calls himself a *profugus* from Corinth, and at 80, an “ill-omened guest” (*infaustus hospes*). He also uses an imperative form, *profuge* (“flee”, 80) when he muses that his mere presence is having a catastrophic effect on Thebes. By repeating this terminology, the Pythia’s prophecy draws attention to the ways in which Oedipus has misread both his situation and his identity.<sup>43</sup> For Oedipus, his supposed exile from Corinth represents proof – or at least reassurance – of his innocence; for the Pythia, it represents precisely the opposite. Further, the term *profugus* in the Pythia’s oracle makes most sense if read as a substantive in apposition to the verb *liquerit*: *mitia...remeabunt sidera.../ si profugus Dircen Ismenida liquerit hospes* (“gentle stars will return if the guest leaves Ismenian Dirce as an exile”). Taken in this way, *profugus* implies not Oedipus’ past, not the exile he assumes he is undergoing already, but his future exile from Thebes, a journey he will begin at the play’s end. Thus, the text of the Pythia’s speech reinterprets the text of Oedipus’ own, earlier speech; in doing so, it invites the play’s audience to see

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<sup>42</sup> Parallels noted by Mastronarde (1970) 300 and Boyle (2011) *ad Oed.* 92-4. The final syllable of *cruenta* in line 642 can in fact scan as either long or short, ambiguously agreeing both with *sceptrum* and with *dextra*.

<sup>43</sup> Pratt (1939) 92 notes that the Pythia’s prophecy echoes key words from Oedipus’ earlier speech, but a mistake in the manuscripts leads him to overstate his argument. Pratt follows manuscript A in reading *non* at the beginning of line 23 – *non ego penates profugus excessi meos* – rather than the far more plausible *hoc* suggested by Bentley and accepted by Zwierlein (1986); Töchterle (1994); and Boyle (2011). As a result, Pratt asserts that the Pythia contradicts Oedipus directly (by calling him an exile) when she actually reinterprets the king’s words in a subtler manner.

in both Oedipus' and the Pythia's words meanings that are opaque to Oedipus himself.

The Pythia also challenges Oedipus' claims about knowledge, by declaring the king *Phoebo iam notus et infans* ("known to Phoebus already, as a child", 235). The passive form, *notus*, balances the active form, *noscere*, that Oedipus has used just 20 lines earlier when asserting his ability to interpret oracles: *ambigua soli noscere Oedipodae datur* ("understanding ambiguities is a skill granted to Oedipus alone", 216). Given that, throughout the play, Oedipus is the object of other people's analysis, the passive *notus* is perfectly appropriate: far from knowing, Oedipus is known. He is, moreover, known via the *notae* on his body, which must be recognized and interpreted in the same manner as a text – Frederick Ahl notes this pun when he translates *notus* in line 235 as "marked".<sup>44</sup> This passive form of *noscere* appears again later in the tragedy, at another significant moment, when Oedipus asserts his self-knowledge in face of what is by now overwhelming evidence to the contrary: *sed animus contra innocens / sibi que melius quam deis notus negat* ("but on the other hand my mind, innocent and better known to itself than to the gods, denies it", 766-7). The phrase *deis notus* recalls *Phoebo notus* in 235 and in doing so, it points once again to Oedipus' status as an object of analysis and a text to be read. It also confirms – if any confirmation were necessary – that Oedipus has failed as an interpreter of texts because he does not know himself. Despite Oedipus' valiant assertions to the contrary, events will prove that the gods actually do comprehend his mind far better than he does.

### *Unveiled Speech*

As must be clear by now, Seneca's tragedy relies on the audience's prior knowledge of the Oedipus story, and it is from this assumed knowledge that the play derives the majority of its effects. Seneca ensures even at the play's outset that his audience is aware of Oedipus' guilt, for instance by having the king declare correctly – albeit for the wrong reasons – that he is the cause of the plague (*Oed.* 36). The audience is also expected to understand Oedipus' identity in advance, from its reading of earlier texts,

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<sup>44</sup> Ahl (2008) 208.

Sophocles above all.<sup>45</sup> The result is not just dramatic irony, however, because by inviting audience members to see what Oedipus cannot, Seneca encourages them to take a critical view of Oedipus' kingship.

A striking characteristic of poet figures and poetic texts in this play is that they are, on the whole, hostile towards Oedipus. The Sphinx is an obviously antagonistic *uates*, but the Pythia and Laius too denounce the protagonist in remarkably violent terms, portraying him more or less as a tyrant who has seized power and enjoys it by illegal means. The Pythia describes Oedipus' current state of kingship as *sceleratae gaudia caedis* ("the joys of criminal slaughter", 236) while Laius calls his son "a bloodied king, who seizes the scepter as a prize of savage slaughter" (*rex cruentos, pretia qui saevae necis / sceptrum...occupat*, 634-5). Although technically correct, both descriptions attribute to Oedipus an unfair degree of intent, as if he had murdered Laius for the express purpose of stealing his throne. In effect, Seneca grants both the Pythia's and Laius' speeches a slightly political bent; he presents them as opposing not just Oedipus, but Oedipus in his position as king. Because of their political quality, moreover, Laius' and the Pythia's poetry bears some resemblance to opposition literature: it criticizes the way a powerful figure wields his power, and it invites the audience to acknowledge this criticism, while the ruler himself cannot fully access the text's meaning.

This gulf that Seneca creates between Oedipus' understanding and the audience's results in what may reasonably be termed 'doublespeak', a situation in which a text's potentially subversive meaning is comprehensible only to those who can detect its 'code' and therefore interpret it in the proper way.<sup>46</sup> This kind of veiled speech typically takes the form of allusive language, which hides a hostile meaning beneath a more innocuous one. Careful work by Frederick Ahl in particular shows how Roman writers under oppressive regimes use figured language to voice their political opposition.<sup>47</sup> The two scenes of prophecy in Seneca's *Oedipus* perform a similar function, though they do not use quite the same method. Nothing of what the Pythia or Laius says could be classed as allusive, figured, or veiled. If anything, their accusations are presented in very clear terms, and seem to be made clearer still when

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<sup>45</sup> In making this claim, I disagree with Ahl (1991) and (2008), who argues for Oedipus' innocence both in Sophocles' text and in Seneca's.

<sup>46</sup> For further definition of the term 'doublespeak', see Bartsch (1994) 64-8.

<sup>47</sup> Ahl (1984a) and (1984b).

both texts address Oedipus directly, in the second person. The Pythia, as reported by Creon, declares:

nec tibi longa manent sceleratae gaudia caedis:  
tecum bella geres, natis quoque bella relinques,  
 turpis maternos iterum reuolutus in ortus.

Villainous killer, you will not enjoy your pillage much longer!  
 You'll fight a war with yourself, leave war to your sons as their portion,  
 Son, who vilely returned to rise back in the womb of the mother.

(*Oedipus* 236-8)

Laius, also reported by Creon, addresses Oedipus in much the same manner:

te, te cruenta sceptrum qui dextra geris,  
te pater inultus urbe cum tota petam

You hold my scepter in your bloodstained hands.  
 But I, your father, as yet unavenged,  
 Will, with the whole world, hunt you down.

(*Oedipus* 642-3)

Strictly speaking, it is not unusual for oracles to be delivered in the second person, as they are, for example, in Herodotus 1.65 (ἦκεις, ὦ Λυκοόργε, ἐμὸν ποτὶ πῖονα νηόν; “O Lycurgus, you have come to my rich temple”) and 1.85 (Λυδὲ γένος, πολλῶν βασιλεῦ, μέγα νήπιε Κροῖσε; “Lydian, king over many, O Croesus, you great fool”). In the case of Seneca’s Pythia, however, the second person forms are particularly striking because Oedipus does not acknowledge them as being directed at him. In any other context, these forms could be interpreted as generic exclamations; when spoken by Creon, directly to Oedipus, they acquire an unavoidably condemnatory tone. For an audience acquainted with Oedipus’ story, the meaning of both the Pythia’s and Laius’ words is clear to the extent of being thoroughly ‘unveiled’.<sup>48</sup> But Oedipus still cannot make sense of these pronouncements, and it is from this dissonance, from this gap between Oedipus and the audience that doublespeak emerges. Laius and the Pythia both create poetic texts that criticize a ruler; the ruler neither understands, nor in the Pythia’s case even detects the criticism; the play’s audience, however, is able to

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<sup>48</sup> Thus Boyle (2011) *ad Oed.* 624-58 calls Laius’ prophecy “a masterpiece of clarity.”

activate the text's meaning and in doing so, is able to smile grimly at Oedipus' expense.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the poetic texts presented in Seneca's play appear subversive not just because they critique a ruler, but more specifically because they condemn him in terms that he himself cannot properly comprehend. By pitting Oedipus' analytical ability against that of the tragedy's external audience, Seneca evokes the political pressures brought to bear on literary activity under the principate, a time when writers would voice their resistance by relying on the shared and prior knowledge of a particular interpretive community. The Pythia and Laius likewise rely upon an interpretative community in order to convey their accusations. The only difference, in their case, is that their speech is made allusive by its context rather than through its language.

### *Conclusion*

The scenes of extispicy, prophecy, and necromancy that punctuate Seneca's *Oedipus* draw attention to repeated confrontations between poets and autocrats, rulers and readers. Each of these episodes resembles a poetic text, which, in the process of revealing the king of Thebes' identity, also contests his power. A major theme of Seneca's tragedy is the struggle for authority that occurs simultaneously in the realm of politics and of art, with Oedipus in particular assuming that his analytical ability is an extension of his position as king. All acts of interpretation, in this play, are bids for control: Oedipus develops his own version of events in order both to assert and to preserve his absolute power; the play's *uates* undermine that power by transforming Oedipus himself into a text; finally, the play's audience members are encouraged to assume power because of their superior ability to read and comprehend the texts that Oedipus cannot decipher. Far from being *certus*, in his rule, his views, or even his sense of himself, Seneca's Oedipus turns out to be fundamentally *dubius*, a collection of poetic and prophetic symbols, a riddle for others to decode and thereby, to dominate. Over the course of the tragedy, Oedipus moves from analyzing subject to analytical object, a transformation that deprives him of his privileged position chiefly

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<sup>49</sup> Understandably enough, the audience plays a crucial role in detecting subversive meaning and creating doublespeak; MacMullen (1966), 41 remarks, "code depends on decoders." Bartsch (1994) 65-6 makes a similar point: "in practical terms it was the audience's reaction that transformed a given statement into an act of opposition or an ad hominem slur."

because he fails to understand, or even try to understand, himself. What characterizes Seneca's Oedipus is his persistent assumption that power can be translated into knowledge. But the play's *uates* and the audience realize that this equation only works when it is the other way around.

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